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SIPDIS

EUR/WE (JLARREA); EUR/WE/UBI (NOLAN);DRL/IRF (KELLY)

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SUBJECT: VATICAN: UK TAPS NORTHERN IRISH CATHOLIC AS AMBASSADOR

REF: VATICAN 507

CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Pol/Econ Chief, Vatican, State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The UK has selected Francis Campbell, a 35-year-old Catholic from Northern Ireland, as ambassador to the Holy See. We understand that Campbell will become the first Catholic to represent the UK at the Vatican since the Reformation. Campbell is a former diplomat and advisor at 10 Downing St. who has close ties to PM Blair. After leaving government service, he worked for Amnesty International, leaving due to philosophical differences. He is said to be open to -- but not uncritical of -- the U.S. Campbell's appointment occurs during an awkward period in UK - Holy See relations, during which the UK irked Vatican officials by co-locating its embassy to the Holy See with its representation to Italy, and by placing what critics called a "help wanted ad" for a new ambassador in the media (reftel). Vatican UK Country Director Monsignor Bernie Auza (protect) was pleased by the appointment and called Campbell "well prepared" for the job. He thinks that the appointment is actually an "about-face" from the UK's previous desire to deemphasize its representation here. Though his age may invite some questions, Campbell has the potential to reinvigorate UK-Holy See relations. The appointment of a well-connected, energetic Catholic by a government known for its historic animosity to Catholicism over the past several centuries figures to be well received here. End Summary.

Catholic Selected as Ambassador

¶2. (C) Vatican-based contacts have told us that the UK has selected Francis Campbell, a 35-year-old Catholic from Northern Ireland, to be the next British ambassador to the Holy See. The appointment is due to be announced Friday November 11. We understand that Campbell would become the first Catholic to represent the UK at the Vatican since the Reformation.

Solid Resume

¶3. (C) We defer to Embassy London for definitive background on Campbell, but contacts told us he has a solid resume, despite his youth. He served in the Foreign Office in New York at the UN, at the UK Embassy to Italy, and also at 10 Downing St. as a foreign policy advisor to PM Blair. In fact, he is said to be very close to the PM, and traveled recently to the U.S. with Mrs. Blair. Following his government service, Campbell worked for Amnesty International. Though according to one source, he is a "left-leaning" Catholic, he reportedly tired of some of Amnesty's rhetoric, and left his post some months ago. Our contact said that Amnesty's gradual move towards support of abortion rights (it had traditionally remained neutral on the issue) may have influenced Campbell's move. He is said to be open to -- but not uncritical of -- the U.S.

Awkward Period for UK - Vatican Relations

¶4. (C) Campbell's appointment occurs during an awkward period in UK - Holy See relations, during which Vatican officials were miffed by the British decision to co-locate its embassy to the Holy See with its representation to Italy. Then the UK raised eyebrows and became the butt of jokes around the Vatican by placing what critics called a "help wanted ad" for a new ambassador in the media (reftel). As it turned out, the search turned up some 146 candidates, according to a Vatican-based source. One candidate was a British citizen already living in Rome, apparently attractive to the parsimonious UK in part because she would have been able to use her current house as the official residence. Our source said the group was winnowed to eight - four diplomats and four non-diplomats including a "Jewish banker," two current ambassadors, and a Catholic financial analyst. In addition to being close to the Blairs, Campbell reportedly had the support of some high-profile British

Catholics. Some ability in French and Italian was also helpful.

Vatican: Campbell is "Well Prepared"

15. (C) Monsignor Bernie Auza (protect), the Holy See's Country Director for the UK, knows Campbell and called him "well

prepared" for the job. He thinks that the appointment is actually an "about-face" from the UK's previous desire to deemphasize its representation here. Auza told us he thought that PM Blair only got wind of the plight of the UK mission when the controversy bubbled over, and then sought to rectify the situation. "He wanted someone who knew the Vatican and the issues here," Auza said. Campbell, in fact, had accompanied Blair in his celebrated 2003 visit to Pope John Paul II at which he was rumored to have received communion from the pope - an act with significant religious and social ramifications for a non-Catholic such as the British PM.

Comment

16. (C) Though his age may invite some questions, Campbell has the potential to reinvigorate UK-Holy See relations. Auza seemed pleased by the news and noted that an ambassador with close ties to Blair could be helpful. He went so far as to say that Campbell's age could be a plus, as an energetic diplomat in the thick of his career would want to make things happen and not simply become a fixture on the cocktail circuit. The appointment of a Catholic by a government known for its historic animosity to Catholicism over the past several centuries also figures to be well received here; it is bound to make a stir when it is broken in the press.

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